DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 741 CS 013 793

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TITLE	The Challenge of Continued Learning.
INSTITUTION	Reading Recovery Council of North America, Columbus, OH.
PUB DATE	1996-00-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT	Network News; p1-4 Spr 1996
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Techniques; *Creative Thinking; *Early Intervention; *Inservice Teacher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Primary Education; Professional Training; Reading Difficulties; Reading Instruction; Social Environment; *Teacher Improvement
IDENTIFIERS	*Reading Recovery Projects; Teacher Appraisal for Improvement; *Teacher Leaders; Thinking Approach to Problem Solving

ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges for teacher leaders can be working with Reading Recovery teachers in continuing contact in ways that build upon and extend their understandings. Continuing contact sessions for experienced Reading Recovery teachers differ from the initial training experience, and activities in these sessions should foster teacher thinking. Points to be considered in continued learning situations are: (1) teacher contact sessions should be particularly challenging and productive; (2) the social context of continued contact is the originator of higher learning and should provide a supportive learning environment; (3) teachers' roles in their working environments may affect their levels of participation in continued learning; (4) conversations are valuable for exchange of information and should include review and evaluation of teaching procedures, and (5) creative preparation and flexible presentation are important for the effectiveness of the session. Contains 11 references. (EF)

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The Challenge of Continued Learning.

by Jane Ashdown

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READING RECOVERY® COUNCIL OF NORTH AMERICA

Network News

Spring 1996

A Newsletter for Reading Recovery Teacher Leaders, Site Coordinators, and Trainers in Canada and the United States.

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Network News

The *Network News*, a publication of the Reading Recovery Council of North America, is produced twice annually for Reading Recovery educators in Canada and the United States. Editorial offices are located at the

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Purdue University
1442 Liberal Arts
and Education Bldg.
West Lafayette, IN 47907-1442
317-494-9750
Fax 317-496-1622

Editor: Maribeth Schmitt

The Challenge of Continued Learning

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One of the greatest challenges for teacher leaders can be working with Reading Recovery (RR) teachers in continuing contact in ways that build upon and extend their understandings. Although the training year involves extensive and perhaps novel learning, being *experienced* RR teachers still brings with it the challenge of new children and the need for teachers to pool their collective wisdom on their most puzzling pupils (Clay, 1995).

Clay (1993) describes the teacher leader role as complex and requiring training in "a wide range of theoretical and practical skills" (p. 28) which enable teacher leaders to function as a "re-directing system" (Goodlad, 1977). This is necessary because of the sometimes conservative nature of school systems, which can work against change and innovation (Fullan, 1996). Just as classroom teachers can succumb to the "flattening effect of habit" as described by Rudduck (1985), beyond the training year RR teachers can be vulnerable to *conserving* pressures. This means they may gradually replace effective teaching procedures with those that may inhibit the children's progress. Continuing contact sessions for trained teachers serve as part of a re-directing system and as part of the quality-assurance effort to stop the drift away from accelerative teaching.

In this article, I plan to discuss the ways in which continuing contact for experienced teachers differs from the initial training experience and to offer suggestions for engaging teachers in activities that foster *thinking* about children.

Fostering Learning Through Increased Thinking

In *Reading Recovery: The Wider Implications of an Educational Innovation*, Clay (1993) reminds us of the need for teachers to come together to:

- discuss two lessons taught behind the one-way screen
- ask "why" questions about children's behavior
- question the effectiveness of their teaching

This represents an essential framework for continuing contact; however, sustaining the effectiveness of these sessions can be a challenge. We need to consider ways to ensure increased learning during continuing contact sessions.

... when teacher thinking improves, teacher performance and student achievement improve as well

Research indicates that when teacher thinking improves, teacher performance and student achievement improve as well (Glickman, 1983; Sprinthall & Theis-Sprinthall, 1983). It seems likely then that more learning will result if teachers are engaged in activities that foster thinking about children. So how do teacher leaders inspire productive teacher-thinking during continuing contact sessions?

There is already a clear framework established during the training year to foster this thinking through the observation and reflective talk about two lessons, followed by discussion and use of *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training* (Clay, 1993). However, this framework will need to be utilized in different ways to meet the needs of experienced teachers. Because teachers meet less frequently for continuing contact than during the training year, it is critical that these teaching sessions be particularly challenging and productive.

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Teacher Thinking and the Social Context of Continuing Contact

Vygotsky's (1978) theories about learning remind us that higher mental functions originate in relationships between individuals, so development in Vygotsky's terms appears twice--first at the social level and later in the individual. This is a useful theory for thinking about training sessions, but is also useful for valuing the social context of continuing contact for experienced teachers.

Clay describes teachers-in-training as "apprentices under tuition and supervision during their first years of operation" (1993, p. 85). That fits well with the U.S. model of RR teacher training where the teachers receive university credit and the teacher leader serves as an adjunct instructor. The term "tutor", which is used in other countries for the teacher leader role, may more aptly describe the responsibility for scaffolding teachers-in-training during their extensive learning period as apprentices.

... consider the teachers' working environments – are they part of an "active" context or a "passive" context in school?

Once teachers have completed their training and the teacher leader is no longer in the role of university-based instructor, the social context of apprenticeship/supervision evolves to one of assistance and professional collegiality, where the teacher leaders are engaged in monitoring, supporting, and consulting activities. This change could be discussed with the teachers at an early continuing contact session by encouraging them to think and talk about what they anticipate to be some of the differences between the training experience and their current roles.

While RR teachers-in-training may consider interactions with teacher leaders as a form of *assessing*, as described by Tharp and Gallimore (1955), in contrast, *assisting* experienced teachers in refining their instruction so that improving children's performance is the ultimate goal is more conducive to improved teacher performance. Fostering a sense of mutual assistance and responsibility for learning among RR teachers during the training will allow for a smoother transition to the post-training years.

Such a supportive context will help teacher leaders demonstrate the reasoning behind various aspects of the continued learning environment. For example, teacher leaders sometimes complain that trained teachers are reluctant to bring children to teach behind the screen at continuing contact sessions. The roots of this reluctance can probably be traced to the training year when they may have first experienced anxiety about this novel task. Encouraging the teachers to talk about why observing lessons continues to be included after the training year and to identify what they find helpful about this for their own practice would be beneficial.

Such expectations for trained teachers to talk with each other (something that will have been built into the training year) about fine-tuning their teaching not only contributes to a sense of mutual assistance and responsibility for solving teaching problems, but can also create a context that reflects a group of professionals striving to develop and maintain a level of "expertise". In his discussion of expertise, Bereiter (1993) describes the career of an expert as "progressively advancing on the problems constituting a field of work" (page 11) whereas the career of the non-expert "is one of gradually restricting the field of work so that it more closely conforms to the routines the non-expert is prepared to execute." (page 11). In the role of professional colleague, the teacher leader is still responsible for fostering continued development of teacher expertise in teaching individual children.

One way to challenge routine thinking about children in RR may be to encourage experienced teachers to select children for teaching behind the screen who have been a particular surprise or puzzle to them. This keeps afresh the importance of designing unique programs as a way to advance on each child's reading difficulties and to teach for accelerated learning (Clay, 1993).

There is no denying this shift in the teacher leader role is a challenge, especially when running both a training class and periodic continuing contact sessions. Perhaps another way to think about teacher leaders' relationship to trained teachers is to consider Fullan's (1993) comments about pressure and support:

> ***Successful change projects always include elements of both pressure and support. Pressure without support leads to resistance and alienation. Support without pressure leads to drift or waste of resources. (p. 91)***

Finding a balance here may be helpful in supporting more productive social contexts for RR teachers.

Teacher Thinking and the Social Context Beyond Continuing Contact

There are external forces that may affect the teachers' level of participation in continued learning. For example, the social context beyond continuing contact can serve to inhibit or promote productive sessions for the trained teachers. To address this issue, we need to consider the teachers' working environments--are they part of an "active" context or a "passive" context in school?

An active context might be characterized as an "informed" context in which the teacher leader will have played a considerable role in the past but where selection and discontinuing of children and other program decisions are now managed at the school level by a team including the trained RR teacher. In this context the teacher leader serves in a consulting role with the school team, monitoring the situation and providing help when needed. A passive context at the school level, on

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the other hand, involves a "wait for the teacher leader syndrome" which engages the teacher leader in considerable micro-management of children's programs, representing a more controlling and supervisory role for the teacher leader and a professionally more dependent role for the RR teacher.

These contrasting contexts at the building level could impact the effectiveness of the continuing contact program as teachers from a more active context are likely to be more self-managing and contribute in productive ways to the session. Recognizing this difference may help teacher leaders work toward assisting the teachers from passive contexts in developing attitudes approaching self-management, since, hopefully, the interaction with teachers from active contexts will foster this type of thinking.

Experienced teachers have learned how to observe both children and teachers ...

Teacher Thinking and Conversation as a Foundation

Conversation takes many forms during continuing contact sessions and all need to be acknowledged and valued for their important contributions to continued learning. For example, because teachers are not meeting as regularly as during the training year, the opportunity for socializing may take priority for some of them. Because the sharing of experiences can be productive and supportive, organizing the session to allow time for this is suggested. If continuing contact is during the school afternoon, then teachers could be encouraged to lunch together prior to the session. If it is an after school session, then refreshments should be available *before* the session starts. This way teachers can talk together for a while before shifting their attention to the teaching sessions behind the screen.

Teacher leaders often complain they have more difficulty getting experienced teachers to talk behind the screen than they did during the training year. Because of this, the design of sessions for continuing contact teachers needs to look different. A longer period of talk prior to the teaching, perhaps some as a whole group and some as brief interactions in pairs, may be helpful especially as trained teachers may not all know each other.

... talk is not enough; it must be linked to practice through a review of the teaching procedures and the teachers' own evaluation...

Experienced teachers have learned how to observe both children and teachers well, so as the lessons begin, they can be expected to shift quickly in their observations of the children's behavior to inferences about their processing on text. They can then evaluate the teaching decisions as a basis for expanding and refining their own teaching expertise. However, experienced teachers sometimes become quite rigid and dogmatic in their talk at the screen or, at the other extreme, habitual, soothing, and unproductive in their comments. Fostering tentativeness in the observations and hypotheses generated by trained teachers may be more challenging for the teacher leader in this setting than during the training year.

Chapter 11 in *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control* (Clay, 1991) is particularly helpful for teachers in developing rationales for keeping an open-ended theory or hypotheses about children's processing. In addition, research into the interactions of a successful teacher curriculum planning team (Engestrom, 1994) noted the prevalence of *conditionals* in the teachers' talk (e.g., perhaps..., might..., maybe..., etc.). Engestrom comments that the "use of conditionals was robust and powerful in keeping the doors of thought open to alternatives..." (p. 59), however, he cautions that such talk must eventually become grounded in *documentation*, which for trained teachers occurs through use of the *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training* (Clay, 1995), the lessons observed, and the children's records. Said simply, talk is not enough; it must be linked to practice through a review of the teaching procedures and the teachers' own evaluation of what they have clarified for themselves.

Teacher Leader Preparation for Fostering Thinking

Preparation for the teacher training class may seem straightforward because there is a particular momentum to the training. However, preparing for continuing contact may sometimes seem a more elusive process, but still a necessary and considerably important one. There are several ways teacher leaders may approach the planning task by considering current needs. For example, building on topics from a previous continuing contact session, using interactions with teachers on school visits, or reviewing annual evaluations of the program can all be the basis for preparation of the session by raising questions that need to be explored and will foster thinking about children.

As a word of caution, a tightly controlled agenda prepared by the teacher leader will not necessarily allow teachers to express and generate their own teaching concerns which must be addressed during the session. Experienced teachers need a brief opportunity at the start of the session to identify the teaching issues that concern them and these need to be acknowledged by teacher leaders and skillfully woven into the larger theme for which they prepared.

Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training (Clay, 1995) and *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control* (Clay, 1991) remain important sources of preparation, as they were during the training year. Also, seeking help from peers can be valuable. For example, working with a teacher leader

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colleague can sometimes help one approach a familiar issue like "teaching for accelerated progress" in a fresh and novel way; having a colleague observe the session can provide another pair of eyes to generate useful insights for the session evaluation. It is also helpful to use the excellent resource paper prepared by the RR staff at the University of Illinois which gives suggestions and rationales for various components of continuing contact for trained teachers.

Conclusion

The National Staff Development Council, in cooperation with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (1995), recently issued standards for staff development in elementary schools. The very first standard reads:

> ***Effective elementary school staff development requires and fosters the norm of continuous improvement. (p. 5)***

The supporting rationale emphasizes the need for educators to refine skills and construct "craft knowledge" while working with peers. This is strong support for continuing contact and a challenge to those in teacher leader roles to set the highest expectations for expanding the quality of continuing contact sessions for experienced teachers.

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